The Rambler Writes of the Old Coton Farm

RESTING under the oaks that stretch rough boughs above Belmont Chapel and the pallid tomb erected there to the memory of Margaret Mercer, the Rambler looked across fields to another low and rounded hill where a big brick house poked its heavy chimneys higher than the oaks and cedars and showed its gables, porch columns and bits of wall through the branches of leafless trees. That is Belmont House. One can trace a double line of cedars extending from the deep grove which holds the chapel in its embrace to the trees which grow around the big brick house.

Those cedars mark the outline of an old lane which led between the mansion and the chapel. It is a way that was well trodden many years ago, but it is not often that anybody walks that way now. Even the newer roads which lead from the Leesburg pike and the Ashburn road into the woods of Belmont Chapel seem to be as old as roads can be, and yet preserve their right to be called roads. Neglect soon makes even a new road look old, and the bitterest neglect a road can suffer is to be foresaken by man and horse.

The ways that penetrate the gloomy, almost ghostly, woods of Belmont Chapel never were automobile roads. It is likely that the chug of a gas engine never broke the quiet of that grove, where, under dead leaves and forest mold, lie the bones and ashes of perhaps thousands of people to whom the fine vistas of the Goose creek region, the Broad run region and the Sugarland run region were more familiar than they are to you and me.

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Services are no longer held at Belmont Chapel and it is only at sadly distant intervals of time that a human being will pass that way, and then that man or woman will enter the tangle of periwinkle that has woven a deep green mat over the cemetery and lay a little bunch of flowers on a grave. It may be only a bunch of wild flowers or a cluster of roses gathered in the garden at home. But they seem as bright as the richest blooms which ever the deft hands of a florist wove into a memorial garland. The Rambler will bet his week's salary that the prayer accompanying that humble bunch of flowers will ascend as high and get as kindly hearing at the Throne of Grace as any prayer that ever went along with orchids or hothouse roses. However, these are idle thoughts and the Rambler must keep the promise he made last Sunday to tell of his visit to Belmont House and "to relate such facts concerning that interesting place as he was able to gather in the course of a Sunday walk."

The Rambler did not go to Belmont House from Belmont Chapel by following the ancient lane outlined across the fields by the double row of cedars. There are times, when weariness is upon one, that a short walk looks long, and this was one of those times. Belmont House was reserved for another Sunday trip. The Rambler left the train at the little station called Belmont Park, of which he told in the first narrative of the Goose creek series. He took the road leading north toward the river and the Leesburg pike and said "good morning" to Millard Mason Atwell, who was the first man the Rambler met when he invaded the Goose creek country late last summer. Then he stopped and said "howdy" to Charles Stunkel, a man written of in the second narrative as the stonecutter who has in his garden a piece of strange and curious marble, of which the columns in Statuary Hall are carved, and which perhaps came from the forgotten quarries out of which the famous columns were taken, very near a century ago. A mile beyond Stunkel's a bend in the road and the absence of woods bring into view Coton House, a mansion which John Guthrie Hopkins, a rich man, built on the Lee farm of Coton. Coton farm brings many pleasant recollections to the Rambler's mind, and there are some facts about it which he must relate even though the recital delay his arrival at Belmont House.

In the Library of Congress is a book, on the title page of which one may read: "Lee of Virginia—1642-1892—Biographical and Genealogical Sketches of Descendants of Col. Richard Lee, with Brief Notices of the Related Families of Allerton, Armistead, Ashton, Aylett, Bedinger, Bland, Bolling, Carroll, Carter, Chambers, Corbin, Custis, Diggs, Fairfax, Fitzhugh, Gardner, Grymes, Hanson, Jennings, Jones, Randolph, Shepherd, Marshall, Mason, Page, Ludwell, Shippen, Tabb, Taylor, Turberville, Washington and Others." This genealogical work was the result of the labors of Edmund Jennings Lee and was published in 1895. Some of the facts which the Rambler will relate concerning the Lees of Coton and Belmont have been obtained from that source. The Lee family in Loudoun county present many difficulties because of the repetition of like baptismal names not only through the various generations of the same branch of the family, but the same name will be encountered in the several branches of the family and at the same period.

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The first two of the Lees who came to live in Loudoun seem to have been Philip Ludwell Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee, brothers. Philip Ludwell Lee was the eldest surviving son of Thomas Lee and his wife, whose maiden name was Hannah Ludwell.

He was born on the 24th of February, 1726, and died on the 21st of that month, 1775. It is believed that he was born at Stratford House, that magnificent old home still standing on the Potomac near Nomini creek. It may be that he was born at another Lee mansion in that part of Virginia called Mount Pleasant, but Edmund Jennings Lee points out that the tradition is that all the sons of Thomas Lee were born at Stratford

THE NEW COTON HOUSE.

House. Philip Ludwell Lee, after the custom of many influential families in Virginia, was sent to college in England, but the name of the institution which he attended has not been preserved. It is known, however, that he studied law at the Inner Temple, London. On the death of his father he inherited the larger share of Thomas Lee's estate, and among the lands bequeathed were large tracts in Westmoreland and Northumberland counties, in Virginia, on the eastern shore of Maryland, two islands in the Potomac, "and some land by the river (Potomac) above the Great Falls." One of the stories has it that Thomas Lee, many years before the revolution, took up lands along the upper Potomac, believing that some day the colonies would become independent of Great Britain and that the new nation would locate its capital on the Potomac near Great Falls. The historian of the Lee family says: "This story seems rather improbable; one might have prophesied that the growing colonies would one day form themselves into a new nation, but that one could so far in advance predict the location of its capital is rather unlikely. At any rate, prophet or no prophet, Thomas Lee did locate a claim only a few miles above the resent site of Washington."

Howe, in his history of Virginia, after reciting the fact of the creation

GATE AT COTON FARM.

of Loudoun county, in 1757, says that the new county included in its borders some of Philip Ludwell Lee's lands. He continues: "Leesburg, the county seat, was named from the Lee family, who were among the early settlers in the county; it was established in September, 1758, in the thirty-second year of the reign of King George II. Mr. Nicholas Minor, who owned the sixty acres around the court house, had them laid off into streets and lots, some of which, at the passage of the act, had been built upon. The act constituted the Hon. Philip Ludwell Lee, Thomas Mason, Francis Lightfoot Lee, Thomas Hamilton, Nicholas Minor, Josiah Clapham, Aeneas Campbell, John Hugh, Francis Hague and William West, gentlemen, trustees for the town."

About the year 1761 Philip Ludwell Lee, the son of Thomas Lee, was married to Elizabeth Steptoe, a daughter of James Steptoe of Westmoreland county. They left three children. After Philip Ludwell Lee's death his widow married Philip Richard Fendall. She died about 1789. The children of Philip Ludwell Lee and Elizabeth Steptoe were Matilda, who married a cousin named Henry Lee; Flora, who married a near kinsman named Ludwell Lee, and Philip, who was born in 1775 and died in infancy.

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Francis Lightfoot Lee was the sixth son of Thomas Lee of Stratford and his wife, Hannah Ludwell. He was born at Stratford House October 14, 1734. He received his education under private tutors, the principal of whom was Rev. Mr. Craig, who, according to the Lee historian, "not only made him a good scholar, but imbued him with a genuine fondness for the classics." When Francis Lightfoot Lee reached his majority he settled in Loudoun county on lands which had been bequeathed to him by his father, not all the lands of Thomas Lee in Loudoun having been left to Philip Ludwell Lee. Francis Lightfoot Lee was one of the early notables in the politics of Loudoun and was one of the pre-revolutionary representatives of the county in the house of burgesses at Williamsburg. It was not long after his marriage that he left Loudoun and took up his residence in Richmond county, calling his mansion and the adjacent lands Menokin. He married Rebecca, the second daughter of Col. John Tayloe, whose wife was born Rebecca Plater. Their home was Mount Airy, Richmond county, on the James. At the death of Francis Lightfoot Lee he bequeathed "to my nephew, Thomas Lee of Loudoun, all my lots in the town of Matildaville," and named Thomas Ludwell Lee of Loudoun as his executor. In passing, let the Rambler mention that Matildaville was the town which stood at Great Falls on the Virginia side and where the ruin of a house or mill still may be seen. Great expectations were entertained of that place in connection with the around-the-falls canal of the Potomac Improvement Company and the utilization of the water power at the falls for milling and manufacturing. This ambitious project was very close to the hearts of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other distinguished men of the early republican era. As the Rambler has heard the story, Matildaville was named after Matilda Jackson, a daughter of one of the pioneer families in the Great Falls neighborhood. Another story is that the settlement was named after Matilda Trammell, the Trammell's being also a pioneer family in that neighborhood.

Francis Lightfoot Lee named as executor of his will Thomas Ludwell Lee of Loudoun county, and this Thomas Ludwell Lee, as well as the Rambler can make out from the tangle of family names, was a son of Thomas Lee, whose wife was Mary Aylett. Thomas Ludwell Lee married Fannie Carter, a daughter of Robert W. Carter of Sabine Hall, Richmond county, and lived at Coton farm. Perhaps he was the builder of Coton House. There are extant letters from this Thomas Ludwell Lee, written from Coton, to his kinsman, George Carter, who lived at Oatlands, on the upper part of Goose creek, and Carter's mill, at Oatlands, remains today one of the best known place names in that part of the county. These letters deal mostly with farm matters. In one of them he writes that "the ascursed worms" that had ravaged other farms had injured him but little, but that a hailstorm and rust had done him considerable damage. "But," he says, "I got 500 barrels of flour, which you'll say is a very good crop for my poor farm."

This Thomas Ludwell Lee died in 1806, and his will was probated October 14, 1807. In that instrument he styles himself "Thomas Ludwell Lee of Coton." He desired "to be buried decently by the side of my dearly beloved child, Thomas Ludwell Lee, deceased, without any expense that is not absolutely necessary." He bequeathes "all my land lying on the west side of Goose creek, in the county of Loudoun, purchased of Thomas Swann, who purchased of Carter's executors, together with the mill seat appertaining thereto and twenty acres on the east side of Goose creek, to be laid out in the most convenient manner for the mill, and all my lots in the town of Mahildaville devised to me by my uncle, Francis Lightfoot Lee, to my executors."

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Those executors were Fannie Carter Lee, his widow, and George Carter of Oatlands. Further along in the will he makes disposition to his widow of the mill property "now in possession of Obadiah Clifford under lease, and the land on the opposite side of the creek which I purchased of Benjamin Edwards." He makes mention of land "on the east side of the creek, adjoining the land of Ludwell Lee, on which I lately established a farm by the name of the Forest farm." The following provisions are also to be found in the will: "My will and desire is that Coton farm, with all the land annexed to it, except ten acres adjoining the mill lot, which my beloved wife is hereafter authorized to sell, with all the slaves, furniture, stock, farm utensils, carriages and every description of property, shall be kept together for the sole use of my unmarried daughters, who are, immediately on the death or marriage of their dear mother, to possess and enjoy the same, but my express desire is that none of them live in the family more than one month after their marriage, and from the time of their marriage they forfeit all their right of property in the same. After the death or marriage of my last single daughter I desire that the whole property above mentioned be sold, and the money arising from it to be equally divided among all my daughters and their heirs." Under the terms of the will a bequest is made to Landon Carter, son of George Carter of Oatlands.

The children of this Thomas Ludwell Lee of Coton were Thomas Ludwell Lee, who died in infancy; Elizabeth, who became the wife of her cousin, St. Leger Landon Carter, son of Landon Carter of Claves; Mary Aylett Lee, who married Tench Ringgold, long marshal of the District of Columbia. It was from a daughter of the marriage of Mary Aylett Lee and Tench Ringgold that Chief Justice White of the Supreme Court is descended. Another child of Thomas Ludwell Lee of Coton and Fannie Carter was Winifred Beale Lee, who married William Brent, jr., of Richland, in Stafford county, near Aquia creek, the ancestral home of the Virginia branch of the Brent family. Another daughter was Fanny Carter Lee, who died single. Then there was Ann Lucinda Lee, who became the wife of John M. McCarty, a son of **Col. Daniel McCarty and Sarah Mason of Cedar Grove, Fairfax county. The old farm of that couple and their descendants lies on the Potomac between Sugarland run and Broad run. Near the little chapel by the roadside at Daysville, on the Washington and Leesburg pike, a rough dirt road turns from the pike toward the river and leads through those lands.**

The Rambler has knocked about over that old farm and made photographs of the venerable houses still standing on it, but has never yet gotten around to the pleasant work of writing the story of the place. There were still two other children of Thomas Ludwell Lee of Coton. One of these was Catherine, who died single, and the other was named Sydney. Very little has been preserved concerning them. The belief is that Sydney was a girl, and it is also thought that she died without marrying.

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Where the Rambler entered the Leesburg pike from the road which he had traveled from the little railroad station called Belmont Park, a turn to the left and a walk of half a mile or so would have brought him to the new house of Cotton, which at that point is in plain sight. A turn to the right—that is, to the east—would point the way to Belmont house and he took that turn. There is an upslant to the pike along that part of its course and the road is hemmed in by woodland. To the east one sees only the long stretch of gray road which seems to lead into the sky, but of course any traveler with a fair degree of experience and worldly sense knows that that junction of the road and sky is but the crest of the grade he is climbing and that from that point the old road will run level or perhaps start down hill again. To the west one can see the rolling hills that rise above the west side of Goose creek, and miles beyond them the Catoctin mountains stand up bold and blue, the dominant note in the landscape for miles around. It is not a lonely road along this part of the way. Fast-moving automobiles crowd one to the footpath and befog him with dust. The telegraph wires sing their weird song in the autumn wind. The poles and their twelve strands of wire are a feature of the road. Perhaps one may fall to wondering as to what kind of messages are flying through those wires and what manner of people are sending and receiving them. Of course, the Rambler knew that above his head were rushing messages that carried bliss or misery to many, many folk.

When at last you come to the end of the up-grade you find the country on both sides of the road open and there the view expands. On the right are wide fields in which cows are grazing. Five or six hundred yards back from the road, and on the right, gently rises a low ridge. A big brick house stands there under guard of old oaks and tall, dark cedars that are at least as old and perhaps older than the oaks. The front of the house is dark and shadowy, for it faces to the north, and at this season the sun passes across the southern sky. Even in the north gloom that shrouds the front of the house you can make out two tall trees that from their form you believe to be spruces, and by each side of the entrance to the old house is a tall and rotund growth of greenery which you believe must be box trees, or, as they are usually called in this country, "box bushes." And as you come close to the old house you know that this is so. This house on the low ridge and among the oaks and cedars is Belmont. It is the same house which you saw while standing in that grove which through each year, and year after year, throws its deep and lonely shadow over Belmont Chapel and the little cemetery that is a thick tangle of periwinkle.

You pass two stone gateposts. A wire gate swings there, and a road leads from the gateposts straight across the fields toward the house on the ridge. That road was planted with trees, but it has been abandoned. And this was not very long ago, for the trees are young and the stone gateposts are now. The road is now as grassy as the fields and the cows graze there peacefully and well, observing no distinction between road and field. Farther on is a wide, opening in the wire fence which bounds this property. Through that opening a roadway of tar and screening, somewhat broken by frost and thaws, leads to the foot of the ridge. Along the base of the ridge, and separating the park around the house from the pasture, is a five-board fence brightly whitewashed.

As the Rambler passed that fence a gray crane, long of leg and with a patch of red plumage on his nape, came out as if to meet him. Then he (the crane) stretched his wings and cavorted, as though dancing the tango or the foxtrot, just as do those cranes in the zoo, at whose antics children laugh with glee. If a turkey, guineakeet, duck or chicken had suddenly come forth, the Rambler would have felt no inward disturbance, but to be suddenly confronted, on an old, historic and respectable Virginia farm by a long-legged crane with red feathers at the back of his head was a different matter. From that white fence the road curves up the ridge and passes across the front of the old house, but the story of Belmont must be left until next Sunday.

War Privations.

A MAJOR of the intelligence bureau said:

"On the other side of the water the civilian has been up against all sorts of queer privations and hardships. No matches, no coal, no kerosene, no tobacco—that has been the condition of the civilian in many parts of France.

"They tell a story in France about a man who was staggering along a dark street with a grandfather's clock on his back. Another man stopped him and said:

"'Hello, Gaston! Moving?'

"'Moving, be darned!' Gaston answered. 'I'm carrying this to the nearest lamp post so that I can see what time it is.'"